

The Latest Chapter in US-Liberia Relations

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Liberia and the United States have a long history, but since the end of Liberia's bloody civil war in 2003, the relationship has been closer and warmer than ever. Over the past nearly dozen years, the United States has been the largest bilateral partner assisting Liberia in its efforts to rebuild and recover from conflict. We have invested heavily in Liberia's future, working principally through the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the Department of State's Bureau of African Affairs and the Bureau of International Narcotics and Law Enforcement Affairs, the Department of Defense, and the Peace Corps to reestablish health care delivery, strengthen governance and institutions, educate thousands of children and train teachers, rebuild the armed forces and train police, and spur private sector-led economic growth. President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf has been a strong partner in our mutual commitment to advance democratic values, stressing private sector-led growth and ensuring regional security. Indeed, as we entered the beginning of 2014, the future looked bright for Liberia as the fruits of our and others' investments were poised to show dividends; little did we know the shock that awaited us.

As is well known, in March 2014, Liberia had its first confirmed case of Ebola Virus Disease (EVD). Within weeks, the world's largest EVD outbreak had begun in Liberia, Guinea, and Sierra Leone. For many people, 2014 became a blur, marked by fear, sorrow, and despair as we confronted the human impact of this deadly enemy. From the earliest days of the disease outbreak in Liberia, the United States responded, sending experts from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and helping establish the first Ebola testing capacity in Liberia through support from the Defense Threat Reduction Agency and the National Institutes of Health (NIH). We continued to ramp up our assistance as the incidence of EVD grew, overwhelming the capacity of any one country or organization to manage. Over the months, the US response presence grew in direct support of Government of Liberia efforts. In early August, we established our Disaster Assistance Response Team (DART) and deployed many more CDC and USAID personnel. By the end of September, following President Obama's decision to send the US military to assist in the response, we were well on our way to hosting more than 3,000 military and civilian personnel to assist in the fight against Ebola in Liberia. Why? Not only did Ebola present a national security threat to the United States, but Liberia was a partner in desperate need.

While Liberians themselves ultimately deserve primary credit for bringing the outbreak under control and driving the number of cases downward through strong leadership from President Sirleaf and the affected communities themselves, they could not have done it without the support of the United States and other partners. The sheer heft of the US intervention alone was critical to success—by the Government of Liberia's own accounting, the United States provided more than 50 percent of all assistance received in the EVD fight, and that figure probably fails to capture the true value of the US

intervention, such as fixed costs and overhead for US military and government personnel deployed for the fight. But the response was one of true partnership, built on the foundation of deep historic ties, strengthened and tempered through our joint development efforts in the post-conflict period. This relationship gave the United States access and credibility at all levels of the government and society to provide technical advice, policy guidance, and moral support. From the outset, we have worked with the Government of Liberia as partners, in support of the Government's own response plan, and stayed flexible enough to shift approaches in consultation with the Government of Liberia and as the nature of the epidemic changed.

To a certain extent the most significant US contribution to the fight against Ebola in Liberia was not a tangible one, but a psychological and moral one that exemplifies the relationship between the two countries. Because of our historical ties, Liberians are keenly attuned to US policies and actions. President Obama's announcement in mid-September that he was committing significant additional resources, including US military forces, to the EVD response efforts in Liberia had a stunning, immediate effect on the ground. Overnight, the mood in Monrovia turned from desperation to hope. Liberians started to believe that they were not alone, and that they would win the fight against Ebola. The US troops were a symbol of US commitment and a promise that we would not let Liberia fail. Of course, the US military was just one aspect of our EVD response efforts. Under the able leadership of our DART, coupled with herculean work by extraordinary CDC personnel, the US military brought additional logistics and planning capability that also boosted the confidence of other international partners and responders. By late September, volunteers were running toward the fight, rather than away. And by December, amazingly, Ebola was no longer hunting Liberians, but Liberians were hunting Ebola, pushing closer to zero new cases. As of mid-March 2015, we are still in the hunt but are halfway through a 21-day countdown with no new confirmed cases.¹

As we stand on the brink of an end to Ebola in Liberia and take stock of the US-Liberia relationship, the partnership remains strong. If anything, the events of 2014, the *annus horribilis*, have knitted us together more closely. As we have done since the end of Liberia's civil war, the United States stands firmly with Liberia in support of its recovery. There is much work to be done to return to "normal" and to resume the path of development. The United States is committed to assist with the rebuilding and improvement of Liberia's healthcare delivery system and the creation of a public health infrastructure through USAID and CDC. We will build on our existing USAID and Peace Corps programs to improve the quality of education. Under Power Africa and the Millennium Challenge Corporation we will seek opportunities to reform the power sector and to get electric power to more Liberians. USAID programs will support broader engagement in the agriculture sector and foster private sector capacity. And, we will continue to pursue security sector reform through the Departments of State and Defense.

Why do we do these things for a small country in West Africa with a population of around four million? The reasons transcend our historical ties with Liberia. Liberia was once the cradle of terrible conflict for the Mano River region, but since the 2005 election

¹ *Editor's Note: A late March confirmed case has restarted the countdown.*

of President Sirleaf, it has been a bastion of democracy and development. Security, once tenuous, has improved over a dozen years as Liberians themselves have grown more confident that peace is a precious commodity that they can preserve. Liberia could ill afford the setback to its development work caused by the EVD epidemic—projects were suspended as contractors fled, revenues plunged, and the economy stalled—just as Liberia was beginning to show fruits of its development efforts over the past decade. As Liberia reopens for the “business of development,” as President Sirleaf put it in her speech to the United States Institute of Peace in late February, speed and focus are of the essence to regain lost ground and to deliver broader tangible benefits to the Liberian people. The time is short, as Liberians go to the polls in late 2017 to select a successor to President Sirleaf, who is finishing her second and final term. It is critical to cement a development path now that will withstand what is perhaps the most important political transition in Liberia’s history. Liberians deserve a brighter and more prosperous future. The United States is committed to supporting Liberia’s journey. It is the right thing to do for a country and people who have suffered so much.